Social Identities, Volume 7, Number 1, 2001

Real Buddhas Don't Laugh: Attitudes towards Humour and Laughter in Ancient India and China

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> 'The tour leader is like the guru', our guide said. 'He takes the sightseers on the road to the tourist spots. The tourists follow him. In quite a similar manner the guru leads his followers on the spiritual path. He shows them everything. He can explain everything. So ask me anything you like.'
> 'Is there some humor which you feel is particularly Indian?'
> 'Humor', the guru of tourism laughed with his hands upon his paunch, 'is like God. You cannot explain it. Either you get it or you don't.'
>
> Siegel (1987)

Introduction

Our investigation of humour in ancient India will start on a negative note. The following excerpt from Buddhist scriptures gives us the official view on laughter and humour of an important religious establishment:

> … At that time, (a) group of six monks, laughing a great laugh, went amidst the houses … (to which the Buddha said) …"Not with loud laughter will I go amidst the houses', is a training to be observed. One should not go amidst the houses with loud laughter. Whoever out of disrespect, laughing a great laugh, goes amidst the houses, there is an offence of wrongdoing, (but) there is no offence if it is unintentional, if he is not thinking, if he does not know, if he is ill, if he only smiles when the matter is one for laughing, if there are accidents, if he is mad, if he is the first wrong-doer.' (Horner, 1983, p. 123).

This regulation comes from the *Vinaya*,[1] the code of conduct for Buddhist monks and nuns, and is one of over 220 rules for monastic behaviour. For a Buddhist monk in ancient India, to laugh out load was an offence, a matter requiring confession and expiation in front of the entire assembly of fellow monastics. Ancient Buddhism was opposed to humour and laughter, as we can see when the concept is brought up again in the *Anguttara Nikaya*:

> This is reckoned as childishness in the discipline of the (Noble Ones), namely immoderate laughter that displays the teeth … Enough for you,

ISSN 1350-4630 print/ISSN 1363-0296 online/01/010097-20 © 2001 Taylor & Francis Ltd
DOI: 10.1080/1350463012004354 9

> if you are pleased righteously, to smile just to show your pleasure. (Woodward, 1979, p. 239)

In various places in Buddhist scriptures, not only in the *Vinaya*, but also in the *Bhrahmajalasutta*, the Buddhist monk is forbidden to attend concerts and theatrical shows. And again, in the extra-canonical *Buddhacarita*, the Buddha-to-be asks 'How can anyone laugh who knows of old age, disease and death?' (Siegel, 1987, pp. 209, 4). Later Buddhist scholastics took their cue from these pronouncements, and from the dramatic classification system of the fourth-century CE Indian scholar Bharata, to develop a scheme of six kinds of laughter, or, perhaps, we should rather say of amusement, ranging from '*sita*, a faint, almost imperceptible smile manifest in the subtleties of facial expression and countenance alone'[2] all the way to '*atihasita*, the most boisterous, uproarious laughter attended by movements of the entire body' (Hyers, 1974, p. 34), see also Gilhus, 1991, p. 267). Of these, a Buddha would be expected to indulge only in the first, and this is in fact the kind of faintly amused, closed-lips smile on can see on many Indian sculptures and paintings of the Buddha and his most advanced disciples. For a monk of lesser attainment, perhaps the second category, *hasita* — a slightly bigger smile that barely exposed the teeth — might be acceptable, but it was certainly something to steer away from. Loud, boisterous laughter, and anything humorous that might cause it, was for the worldling, the unenlightened, the fool.

Let us now move forward some fifteen hundred years. Buddhism, after having been a powerful force in India for centuries, is on the verge of collapse there, partly through re-absorption into a renascent Hinduism, and partly because the Muslim invasions of its North Indian strongholds increasingly make its position untenable. But by now, Buddhism has spread far beyond India, and one of its most influential (if not numerically dominant) forms in China is Ch'an (Zen) Buddhism. Here we find a very different attitude towards humour and laughter. The slim, aristocratic figure of the Buddha with its barely perceptible smile has been replaced in Buddhist art by the broad grin of Pu-Tai (Jap: Hotei), still familiar today as the jolly, fat 'laughing Buddha' of curio shops around the world.

> Historically he is identified with a wandering priest named … Cho Tai-shi (d 916) who carried a large linen sack (hence the name Pu-Tai) with whatever possessions he had, and who was popularly believed to be an *incognito* appearance of Maitreya Buddha. (Hyers, 1974, p. 46)

Another favourite motif in Zen Buddhist art is that of the 'three laughing monks'. It relates to a traditional tale of a monk who had taken a vow never to cross the bridge connecting his island hermitage to the mainland. He was visited by two fellow monastics, and on seeing them off, they were so absorbed in conversation that the island monk had walked across the bridge before he was aware of his own actions. All three of them then collapsed into a helpless fit of laughter. The challenge for the artist is to portray the exact moment when the realisation that a vow has been broken dawns on the three actors and, instead of guilt and self-recrimination, they end up in a backslapping, 'hold-



me-or-I'll fall-down' session of uncontrollable mirth: *atihasita*, precisely the kind of laughter deprecated by early Buddhism. The monk, so the story goes, returned to his hermitage and never broke his vow again. But neither did he brood on the one time he had broken it (see Hyers, 1974, pp. 48–49, see also figure 1).

Indeed, humour in Zen Buddhism has been changed from something to be avoided if at all possible to a teaching device in its own right. Time and again we read of Zen monks and their masters laughing uproariously, of revered teachers clowning around, playing the fool, joking even about things ordinarily held sacred by other Buddhists, not excluding the Buddha himself. Again and again we read about a Zen master who 'clapped his hands and gave a loud roar of laughter' (Hyers, 1974, p. 33). Here Zen monks 'battle' with each other, trying to outdo each other in series of puns, witticisms and non-sequiturs. Consider the following duel of words between Chao-chou and his disciple Wen-yuan, in which each tried to outdo the other in identifying with the lowest thing they could imagine:

> 'I am an ass.'
> 'I am the ass's buttocks.'
> 'I am the ass's faeces.'
> 'I am a worm in the faeces.'
> 'What are you doing here?'
> 'I'm on my summer vacation!' (Hyers, 1974, p. 145)

It is recorded that Wen-yuan 'won' that encounter. Even more bizarre and humorous behaviours can be found among these ancient monastic humorists. Teng Yin-Feng (eighth century), for example, when he had decided his time had come to die, had his disciples search the scriptures and monastic records to find a position in which no Zen master had ever died. He found out that no

master had ever died upside-down, so when his time came, he did a handstand and expired in that position. His awed disciples found themselves unable to take his body, still in an inverted position, to the crematorium, and there he stayed until his sister, a nun, came upon him and exclaimed,

> When you were alive you took no notice of laws and customs, and even now that you are dead you are making a nuisance of yourself!

and poked the body with her finger until it fell down (Hyers, 1974, p. 43). In Zen, though, such behaviour was not merely odd: it was an expression of the essential freedom from constraints the master had attained through years of disciplined meditation. The antinomian moments were recorded, the long hours of contemplation that made them possible were not. Through the discipline, a master could use non-discipline to expose the absurdity of the human situation, and thus encourage the student to further discipline and eventual attainment. Humour had become a teaching device in its own right.

What happened? How did the appreciation of humour in Buddhism change so radically from its early days to its later Chinese development? What does it tell us about the position and development of humour in ancient Asian civilisations? Indeed, what does it tell us about the nature of humour itself? China did, of course, have its own history of humour, and this may have played a role in shaping Zen's attitude to laughter. There is a wry humour discernible in the sayings of the Taoist masters (Lee, 1993). Artists, in China, as in so many other environments, were especially noted for their unorthodox lifestyles and many of them acted in ways that closely resemble the archetype of the Holy Fool as it can be found in other societies (Hyers, 1974, pp. 50–54). But for all that it took from Taoism and Chinese culture generally, Zen always remained Buddhist at heart. Why, then, this decisive break with the earlier Buddhist tradition as far as humour is concerned?

To answer these questions, we need to look, first of all, at humour in ancient India and what little of it has come down to us, and then enquire into the essence of humour itself. Much of what I will say below will concentrate on Buddhism, not only because that is my primary area of expertise, but also because Buddhism served as the only pan-Asian philosophical structure until the early twentieth century, as virtually the only link between the Indian and Chinese worlds. But at a deeper level, much of what I shall explain below could as easily be said of Hinduism and especially Taoism, and this is a thread to which we shall return at the end of this essay. For Asian religious and philosophical thought is inherently humorous, if we dig deep enough into it.

Humour in Ancient India

There is a consistent perception even among scholars that humour hardly existed in ancient India. There are a number of reasons for this: firstly, much of early Indian humour was scatological and erotic in nature, even to the point of being openly pornographic. In the romanised versions and the western-language translations still being reprinted today, most of which were produced by Victorian and Edwardian scholars, these passages are either

omitted entirely or given only in a heavily latinised form. This extends even to the names of characters in ancient Indian plays, some of which, if translated literally and presented at certain university campuses today, might give rise to sexual harassment charges (see Siegel, 1987, p. 68 for some examples). As Elwin first pointed out in 1944, this bowdlerisation process has affected the study of Indian folklore as much as that of sacred texts (Narayan, 1993, p. 184).

For example, in the *Nalinika Jataka* (one of the many traditional Indian tales purporting to be about the previous lives of the Buddha), a naive ascetic seeing a naked woman for the first time wonders what happened to her penis. She explains that it had been torn off by a bear and invites him to inspect the wound and 'kiss it and make it better' (Siegel, 1987, p. 82). In the standard English translation of this Jataka from the Pali Text Society, this passage is simply glossed over and we are told in a footnote that Nalinika 'practises on the simplicity of the ascetic youth with much the same guile as Venus employs to win Adonis' (Francis, 1981, p. 102; this edition was first published in 1895). An unacceptable humorous passage is exchanged for a classical reference, and the humour is lost. The *Kacchapa Jataka* is even more openly pornographic, describing a monkey masturbating in the ear of a meditating brahmin, and gives us the unusual event of the Buddha, albeit in a previous life, cracking a mild joke (Siegel, 1987, pp. 278–79).

The second reason why the humour in ancient Indian texts is often overlooked is that there is almost a concerted effort among believers and scholars, especially, it seems, in Hinduism, to theologise the relevant passages until nothing funny remains. This has been particularly true of those passages that might otherwise have been cut because of their raunchiness, but that are too central to the story to be deleted. For example, in a passage in Jayadeva's *Gitagovinda*, Krishna and his lover Radha are found to be wearing each other's clothes, to the merriment of Radha's companions

> Dressing in darkness after lovemaking, each of the lovers put on the other's clothes by mistake. In later Vaishnava devotional literature, Radha and Krishna intentionally dress in each other's clothes and the comic incident is transformed into a symbol of the ultimate unity of Radha and Krishna. A joke became a doxology. (Siegel, 1987, p. 31)[4]

Similarly, Siegel describes how he attended a shadow puppet performance in Delhi featuring the exploits of the god Hanuman and how the audience roared with laughter at the well known tales, but a Hanuman devotee told him that 'Hanuman is a god who seems to be a monkey to the ignorant [but] he is in no way humorous' (Siegel, 1987, pp. 282–85).

A similar tendency can be found among Indian literary theorists. Jan Gonda, for example, in his monumental *History of Indian Literature*, consistently denies any comic intent among the authors of the Samhita and Brahmana sections of the Vedas (Gonda, 1975, pp. 168, 200, 226, 246–47). In this case, it is not theological concerns that usurp the place of humour, but technical linguistic and literary matters. Still, the message is the same: Indian literature is serious, not humorous. According to some sources, even the Indian govern-

ment has been involved in this effort to 'clean up' the Indian tradition from any vestige of humour (Siegel, 1987, p. 320).

Thirdly, we must consider the vagaries of time and history. In the hot, humid climate of most of India, without chemically treated paper, a manuscript might have had a life span of little more than fifty years before it needed to be rewritten (Tieken and Schokker, 1991, p. 20). With few people being literate, only the most important texts would survive, and for 'important' we can read 'serious'.

Finally, some humour, though certainly not all, is specific to a certain time, place or culture. In contemporary South Africa, jokes about government leaders in the apartheid era are already fading into obscurity. Already, editions of Shakespearean comedies destined to be used by schoolchildren have extensive footnotes explaining the humour that had people rolling in the aisles in Shakespeare's days; and a joke explained is a joke not laughed at. Accordingly, some humorous passages in ancient Indian texts may simply escape western readers, and possibly even contemporary Indians, simply because they were too topical at the time to survive as humour, even if they did survive as texts.

Despite these tendencies to dehumorise Indian texts, a new appreciation of Indian humour has come into being since the publication of Lee Siegel's ground-breaking work *Laughing Matters* (Siegel, 1987. See especially the Bibliographic Essay on pp. 465–70 for further literature on the subject). I shall not attempt to duplicate the entire contents of his fascinating blend of Sanskrit scholarship and personal observation here, only to reiterate some of his main points.

In a sense, Siegel argues, all Indian literature is comic. The western idea of literature as bifurcated between tragedy and comedy does not apply, for the dramatic basis of tragedy, of *hubris* leading to *nemesis*, never developed in India. In Indian literature, there is always a happy ending for the main protagonists, even if it needs to be postponed by a reincarnation or two:

> In Western terms there is no tragedy in India. There are no plays which begin in joy and culminate in sorrowful defeat, no stories of glory in grief and disaster, no conclusions to arouse pity and fear, and no catharsis of those emotions. Rather, there are heroic or romantic melodramas in which one particular aesthetic mood dominates and in which others may play a part … The comic sentiment is not understood in India as a dichotomous principle in relation to a tragic one; it is rather a mood which arises out of an opposition to, or parody of, any of the aesthetic flavours. (Siegel, 1987, p. 8)[5]

Nevertheless, there are moments in the Indian literature that are more overtly humorous than others. These can, as in other languages, be based on language itself. In written Sanskrit, there is no space between two words if the first ends on a consonant and the second begins with a vowel (though these are sometimes added in modern editions). A skilful writer can render entire lines without any sign of spacing or punctuation. This has created the possibility, especially in poetry, of creating sentences that can be divided up in different ways, leading to at least one serious, highbrow interpretation and at least one

comic version. Even if the comic interpretation itself is not particularly funny, the humour lies in the juxtaposition between the two, something that would be immediately obvious to the ancient Indian reader or listener, but less so to us when we read the passage in (the official) translation. In effect, it is a highly sophisticated version of the 'knock-knock, who's there?' joke, or, to put it another way, a vastly extended pun. Although this process does not work nearly as well in English, Siegel has managed to create the following example:

> Thechaplainwasbeatifican-
> dearthysextonitestallsinsex-
> communicationsaintsoveryearnestimateyouratonementogodasoft
> womanslaughtersent

which can be read either as:

> The chaplain was beatific and earthy
> 'Sexton! I test all sins!'
> 'Excommunication?'
> 'Saints over-yearn!'
> 'Estimate your atonement …'
> 'O God!'
> '… as of two manslaughters!'
> End.

or, with a different division of words, as:

> The chap, lain, was beat.
> 'If I can, dear.'
> 'Thy sex tonite stalls. In sex, communications ain't so very earnest'
> 'I (Aye) mate, you rat on men!'
> To God a soft woman's laughter send. (Siegel, 1987, p. 383)

A actual example of this technique in Indian poetry gives us two possible understandings of a single poem, known as *Rasikaranjana*, which emerge in translation as:

> Version 1:
> One should strive at once
> to be devoted to the Absolute Self.
> Damn the man who worships Shiva only occasionally,
> only in distress.
>
> Version 2:
> One should try to get another man's wife
> to do what he wants to do.
> Damn the man who overcomes desire with pain,
> who settles for one wife,
> who conquers himself. (*Rasikaranjana*, in Siegel, 1987, p. 382)

Other Indian poems do not rely on the ambiguity of language for their effect, but on the situation which they present: the seventh-century CE erotic

poet Amaru presents us with the following interview, freely translated by Siegel:

> 'Why is your face all covered with sweat?'
> 'The heat of the sun posed quite a threat.'
> 'But your eyes are wet; why are they red?'
> 'The words of your lover filled me with dread'
> 'But your hair is dishevelled; why such a mess?'
> 'The wind was blowing; no need for distress.'
> 'Your make-up is gone, rubbed all away.'
> 'Yes, rubbed by the shawl I was wearing today.'
> 'But your breathing is heavy; why are you tired?'
> 'From working so hard, doing what you desired.'
> 'Very clever, my friend, you've made not a slip,
> So tell me what rhymes with the bite on your lip?'
> (Siegel, 1987, pp. 14–15)

Even in Indian scriptures themselves, there are humorous passages. In the *Shiva Purana*, for instance, we find a description of the arrival of the gods at Shiva's betrothal rite. As each god appears, the one more splendidly attired than the one before, Mena, the prospective mother-in-law, enquires whether this one is Shiva. Finally the groom shows up, in his customary guise of the tutelary deity of ascetics: wearing a loincloth of elephant skin and a garland of human skulls, his hair matted and his body smeared with ashes, and trailing a retinue of ghouls and demons. Mena promptly faints. As Siegel puts it, this is 'the comic farce that occurs when the Hell's Angel shows up at the home in Southampton to meet the mother of his debutante bride' (Siegel, 1987, p. 394)

And then, of course, there are comic plays. In contemporary western thought on humour, comic drama is often seen as both the archetype and the pinnacle of humour. Time and again, western philosophers of humour in need of an example point to a comic play, in some cases to plays that have since long been forgotten. I would question the presuppositions underlying this belief, but since we are discussing Indian humour in English here, a language in which much even of the vocabulary of humour is derived from stage comedy,[6] we do need to look more closely at Indian comic drama, to see how ancient Indian humour was structured, and even more, how ancient Indian audiences laughed at many of the same things we laugh at today.

Traditional Indian theories of drama, which can be traced to around the first or second century BCE, distinguish among about ten different types of play, but examples of only about four types have survived, and of these, only two are humorous in nature. Firstly, there is the *prahasana*, which has a 'pure' form that portrays only ascetics and mendicants, and a 'miscellaneous' form with a wider cast of characters. Secondly, there is the *bhana*, a solo performance that takes the audience on a vicarious voyage through the demi-monde (Tieken and Schokker, 1991, pp. 7–10).

The plays that have come down to us force us to stretch the definition of 'antiquity' somewhat, having been written in the latter part of what we would normally consider that period, the fifth to seventh centuries CE. They do,

however, point to a much older tradition, especially when we take account of the fact that Bharata produced his dramatic classification system some centuries earlier. There may well have been an earlier indigenous village tradition of slapstick farces and knockabout comedies, now lost to us. The plays that we do have are almost exclusively associated with royal courts and court-associated ranks of society.

It is possible that there was a certain amount of Greek influence in the formation of Sanskrit drama, though the evidence is slim. The backdrop to the stage is a large cloth called a *yavanika*, which is derived from the word *yavana*, meaning Ionian, that is, Greek (Tieken and Schokker, 1991, p. 17). There is, however, no trace of a chorus in any of these plays. Besides the backdrop, there is no evidence that props or masks were used, and female roles were generally played by women.

I do not intend to try and recreate Siegel's 450 page work on the subject (much, though not all, of which is concerned with comic drama), but would rather concentrate on three farces from late Indian antiquity, which are conveniently available in a single volume in Dutch translation (Tieken and Schokker, 1991). Taken together, these three show the broad scope of ancient Indian comic drama.

Indian Comic Drama: The Saint and the Harlot

The *Bhagavad-ajjuka* of Bodhayana, like so many Sanskrit comic plays, starts with a prologue that consists of a dialogue between the director of the play and a *vidusaka* (a stereotypical comic figure, equivalent to the court jester in medieval western society), explaining the rationale behind the performance. Both end up acting two of the main parts, respectively that of an ascetic or yogi and his reluctant disciple, in this example of a 'miscellaneous' *prahasana*.

The Saint and the Harlot (see Tieken and Schokker, 1991, pp. 25–60), as we may translate the title of the play, is what would today be called a situation comedy (or sit-com). The humour of the play lies primarily in the confusion caused by the characters behaving in unexpected ways — the courtesan's soul is removed from her body because the messenger from the realm of Death has confused her with another woman of the same name. The saint then takes possession of the harlot's body with the intention of teaching his student a lesson about the undesirability of sensual pleasures, but while he is so engaged, Death's messenger returns with the woman's soul and seeing her body occupied, deposits the soul in the saint's body. Thus, we have a saint speaking like a harlot and a harlot expounding grammar and philosophy in the most learned Sanskrit terms,[7] causing consternation not only for the student, but among a few other associated characters who have by now entered the scene. In the end, of course, both souls are returned to the appropriate bodies and all ends well enough.

The comic devices in this play are not unusual: the swapping of identities, if not of souls, even the exchange of sexual roles, is a common literary device from antiquity, through the comedies of Shakespeare, to today's television comedies. It seems that, apart from temporarily topical matters, what makes

people laugh has not, after all, changed much over all these centuries. 'Jokes, passed on for pleasure in social intercourse, travel around the world like venereal disease' (Siegel, 1987, p. 255), and we cannot say with any certainty who first thought of such a device, who first realised that it would raise a laugh.

Nothing is known about Bodhayana, the author of the play. The earliest mention of the *Bhagavad-ajjuka* is on a seventh-century CE inscription, which leads one to believe that the play might date to the early part of that century.

Indian Comic Drama: The Merry Pranks of a Drunkard

If the *Bhagavad-ajjuka* is a situation comedy, then the *Mattavilasa*, or *The Merry Pranks of a Drunkard* a 'pure' *prahasana* ostensibly written by the early seventh-century CE South Indian king Mahendravikrama-varman, is what we might today call a comedy of manners (see Tieken and Schokker, 1991, pp. 61–93 and Siegel, 1987, pp. 217–23. An English translation by LD Barnett is available in the *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies V*, 1928–1930, pp. 697–717). There is little that is humorous in the plot itself; instead, the humour lies in the finely detailed nuances of speech and behaviour of the five ascetics who make up the cast. In various ways, all of them ridicule the world-renouncing and ascetic ideals of Indian philosophy. There is, for instance, a Buddhist monk, who lives by rules of conduct that might seem harsh to us, but which in the context of the times were quite moderate, even allowing robes and monasteries, while other yogis were expected to go naked or dress in rags, and to sleep out in the open — the Buddhists were a kind of ascetic gentry by comparison. This monk is caught in the following monologue:

> How is it possible that the Buddha, otherwise so compassionate, who allows us monks to enjoy palaces, luxurious beds and soft robes … that this same Buddha made no similar arrangements regarding wine and women! … It must have been that those elders, the Shtavira monks, those lazy old fogies, just to spite us younger monks, out of envy, purged all the precepts in favour of women and wine from the Buddhist scriptures. I wish I knew where I could find those missing passages! I shall perform a service to the brotherhood by making known to the world the complete teachings of the Buddha! (Tieken and Schokker, 1991, p. 79, the English paraphrase here mainly following the partial translation in Siegel, 1987, p. 217)

Again, the play starts with a prologue, this time between the director and an actress, playing his wife, discussing between themselves the committee that commissioned the play, the king who wrote it, and indulging in some general bickering that gives the impression that what we are about to see is a play within a play. Then the main characters arrive.

The plot, as far as it goes, is simple. The lead character is a *kapalin*, an ascetic member of a Hindu sect of which we know little, but which may well have been an early form of Tantric Hinduism: the *kapalin* openly partakes of meat and alcohol, has a female student, as she is euphemistically introduced, and

uses a human skull for a begging bowl. Indeed, it is when this begging bowl goes missing that the plot begins in earnest. In a drunken rage, the *kapalin* and his acolyte accuse the Buddhist monk of having stolen the skull. The monk at first refuses to show his own begging bowl, which is hidden underneath his robe, but even when it is revealed to be quite unlike a skull, the *kapalin* accuses him of having magically transformed its appearance. The situation is resolved only by the intercession of yet another ascetic, from the *pasupata* sect, and a fool. In the end, it turns out that a dog had run off with the skull. The object is retrieved and all return to their normal lives.

As I have indicated, this is a very different kind of comedy from *The Saint and the Harlot*. Instead of playing up the comedic implications of the situation, it is the satire with which the characters are painted that gives the *Mattavilasa* its humorous character. The Buddhist monk and the *pasupatin* provide *sotto voce* evidence of their erotic interest in the *kapalin*'s concubine. At one stage, she tries to pull the monk by the hair, but unlike the Hindu ascetics, Buddhist monks shave their heads and there is no hair for her to pull. This gives the monk yet another opportunity to praise the prescient wisdom of the Buddha, and the author one to satirise the insistence of religious establishments everywhere that there must be a (divine) reason for all rules of conduct, no matter how abstruse they may appear to be. The play satirises the religious establishments of ancient India as only a play written by a king, designed to be performed at court, could be expected to do.

Of course, whether king Mahendravikrama-varman actually wrote the play remains open to debate. It is always possible that an anonymous author, hoping for royal favour, attributed authorship to the king. Still, the play is mentioned in an inscription attributed to him, and the action takes place in the city of Kanci (Kanchipuram in modern Tamil Nadu), the capital of his realm. If he did write it, he is unique in another respect: he would be one of the few ancient Indian authors of whom we have a near-contemporary portrait. His son and successor Narasimha-varman had a relief sculpture of Mahendravikrama-varman and two of his wives carved in the cave temple complex of Mahabalipuram (Tieken and Schokker, 1991, pp. 61–62).

Indian Comic Drama: The Kick

The *Padataditaka* or *The Kick* by Syamilaka (Tieken and Schokker, 1991, pp. 95–163) presents us with yet another strand of ancient Indian humour. It is a *bhana*, a form of entertainment in which dozens of characters play a part, but only obliquely, because only a single actor is on stage for the entire performance, who describes their comings and goings as he pretends to walk through the seedier parts of the city. The closest equivalent in contemporary society would probably be stand-up comedy.

The prologue in this play involves only the director and is quite short. He is followed on to the stage by the actor, who portrays a *vita*, a kind of gentleman pimp who arranges meetings between courtesans and young aristo-

crats, settles disputes among the harlots and generally acts as a man-about-town:

> [This] form was an actor's medium in which laughter was evoked as much by the mimic and acrobatic dimensions of the play as by the script. … In the *bhanas* a single actor played the part of a parasite, the persona of the satirist, a cultured and often jaded expert in sexual etiquette and amorous arts, who earned his livelihood as a counselor or go-between for a more wealthy patron, an aristocrat or a merchant aspiring to aristocratic manners. The parasite walks through the streets of a city, frequently for the sake of conducting an erotic business transaction for his patron; he describes the people he meets … He mimics their gestures and speaks their lines for them. With urbanity and wit, the parasite does the satirist's dirty work as he exposes the degradations around him. He is at once a spokesman for the satirist and yet, as part of the motley world he describes, he is also an object of satire, a satirist self-satirised … (Siegel, 1987, pp. 59–60)

There is a plot of sorts in *The Kick*, involving a parody of judicial procedure among the *vitas* as they adjudicate between a prostitute and the customer whom she kicked in the face, but that is hardly the point of the play. The real interest lies in the *vita*'s description of and reported interaction with those he meets. To give just one example, it is well known that our word 'barbarian' is derived from the Greek expression of disgust at those who could not speak a civilised language, ie Greek. The *Padataditaka* shows that linguistic prejudice was not limited to the Greek world:

> Who is this other woman? Ah, yes, that must be the Greek girl called Karpuraturishta … although she is a friend of mine, I shall not go and speak to her. After all, who would of his own accord speak to a Greek courtesan? Her voice sounds like the screeching of an ape; her speech consists mostly of [ee] sounds, the consonants are indistinguishable … Away with her, then! (paraphrased from Tieken and Schokker, 1991, p. 154)

Although internal evidence in the play points to Kashmir in Northern India as its origin, only South Indian manuscripts have come down to us. It was probably written around the fifth century CE. The author, Syamilaka, is mentioned in a number of other ancient texts that quote him as an authority on poetics, but little else of his work has survived.

Ancient Indian Humour: the Wider Milieu

Not only did ancient India have comic literature, but the social environment itself was far from a mirthless place: in the *Ambatthasutta*, a brahmin complains to the Buddha how the Sakyas, the Buddha's own clan, had once made fun of him:

> Once, Gotama, I had to go to Kapilavatthu on some business or other … and went into the Sakyas' congress hall. Now at that time there

> were a number of Sakyas, old and young, seated in the hall on grand seats, making merry and joking together, nudging one another with their fingers; and (I think) it was I myself that was the subject of their jokes … (Rhys Davids, 1977, p. 113, see Siegel, 1987, p. 206)

The pan-Asian belief in reincarnation was a rich source of ironic comment as well. From a Tibetan source, we get the following story:

> Once Saint Katyana went begging alms and saw a householder, holding a boy in his lap, eat a tasty-looking fish and throw a stone at a bitch gnawing at the fish bones. Having clairvoyance, Katyana saw that the fish was a rebirth of the man's father. The bitch was his mother's rebirth and an enemy whom he had killed in a former life, and who now wished revenge, had been reborn as his son. Katyana said, 'He eats his father's flesh and throws stones at his mother. In his lap he holds an enemy that will kill him. The wife gnaws at the husband's bones. I feel like laughing at the realities of life'. (Dpal-sprul, quoted in Lichter and Epstein, 1983, p. 234)

In the villages that made up the bulk of Indian society until very recently, the village idiot was a well known figure: 'You must have one, just as you must have a well. You cannot be a self-respecting village without one' (Siegel, 1987, p. 245–46). Most of these would remain simply that, village idiots. A few might make it to the role of *vidusaka* (court jester) at the court of a local aristocrat. And some, benefiting from the Indian tendency to see divinity in all things, might end up with a reputation as a Holy Fool, one who could see God because he was too simple to see the complicated world the rest of us live in. The Holy Fool archetype can even be found within the religious establishment: a Buddhist monk called Little Walker (*Culapanthaka*) for instance, was said to have been unable to memorise even a single verse of the Buddha's teachings, but nevertheless attained enlightenment after some personal coaching by the Buddha (Siegel, 1987, pp. 264–65, see the *Dhammapada Commentaries*, Burlingame, 1979a, pp. 299–310, where *Culapanthaka* is translated as 'Little Wayman'). The next step was for a holy man to refer to himself as a fool, in a deliberate casting aside of all pretensions to wisdom in favour of undiluted devotion (*bhakti*). Ramakrishna, for instance, was fond of referring to himself as a fool (Siegel, 1987, p. 270), though this example takes us rather far away from Indian antiquity.

Philosophical Perspectives on Laughter and Humour

From the above discussion, it will be clear that ancient India has a rich tradition of humour, both in the form of unintentionally humorous passages in otherwise serious texts, and in that of deliberately written humorous texts in a variety of genres. We can now start to reconsider the question with which I started this essay: why do real Buddhas not laugh, at least not in India? And yet, why do Chinese Zen masters laugh, loudly and uproariously?

To start with the first part of this question, one could suggest that an avoidance of boisterous laughter is part of an aristocratic world view. Like

Plato's guardian class (*Republic*, 388e), Buddhist monks were supposed to be far above mere worldly things. Indeed, advice such as that found in the Buddhist scriptures can be found in another aristocratic milieu, far removed in space and time from ancient India: in 1748, Lord Chesterfield wrote to his son:

> Having mentioned laughing, I must particularly warn you against it, and I could heartily wish that you may often be seen to smile, but never heard to laugh while you live. Frequent and loud laughter is the characteristic of folly and ill manners … In my mind, there is nothing so illiberal and so ill-bred as audible laughter. (Holland, 1992, p. 15)

But merely to say that an avoidance of laughter, and hence of humour, is commonly observed in communities with aristocratic pretensions is still not to explain *why* humour should be avoided by such communities. For such an explanation, we need to dig a little deeper, to ask, 'What are these things called laughter and humour?' And for this we must turn to philosophy.

Both Indian and Western philosophers have considered the phenomenon of humour. Indian literary theory sees laughter as falling into two main types. Bharata and his commentator Abhinavagupta saw them as laughter at the perception of ludicrous incongruities and improprieties, and as laughter caused simply by the laughter of others — infectious laughter, as we might put it. Later commentators construed these categories as 'laughter at oneself' (*atmastha*) and 'laughter at another' (*parastha*), which Siegel understands as roughly equivalent to the contemporary western concepts *humour* and *satire* (Siegel, 1987, pp. 50–51). But these concepts do not seem to have been taken up into general Indian philosophical discourse from their origins in literary theory.

Western philosophers, too, have long considered the phenomena of laughter and humour (a useful compendium of both historical and contemporary philosophical approaches to laughter and humour can be found in Morreal, 1987), and in my opinion, the results of their efforts will be of greater utility in understanding both the Buddha's low opinion of laughter and the subsequent use of humour in Zen as a method of attaining enlightenment.

There are three main strands of thought in Western philosophy of humour. It is interesting to note that the vague beginnings of all three can be found in scattered remarks by Aristotle (Morreal, 1987, pp. 129–31). *Superiority theory* can be found in the writings of Plato, Aristotle and Hobbes. It maintains that people laugh because of feelings of superiority over other people, or of superiority over our own former position. Feinberg (1978) refines the superiority theory by making *playful aggression* the key concept of his theory, but it remains in essence a form of superiority theory. Elsewhere, the theory seems to be less in vogue these days. No doubt there is something of this element present in the cruder sort of joke, or in the antics of the circus clown, but does it explain the full range of humour?

Relief theory, which is prominent in the writings of Spencer and Freud, enquires into the physiological basis of laughter and attempts to place the ancient idea of catharsis in a modern scientific setting. Inevitably, such an attempt is limited by contemporary ideas of physiology: Spencer, for example, is forced to use the metaphor of hydraulic power as he tries to show how a

feeling can lead to a physical expression. Just as liquid under pressure requires an outlet valve, so does 'nervous energy' require a release system, and laughter is one of these. Freud's ideas are considerably more subtle, but underlying both views is the idea that laughter (and other behaviours) is a socially acceptable outlet for an excessive amount of nervous 'pressure'. This theoretical approach, with modifications, continues to be popular among psychologists.

Incongruity theory, which can be found in the writings of Kant, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard and many other writers since then, places the source of amusement in a perceived incongruity or inconsistency between the world as we expect it to be. Again the perception of an incongruity may not necessarily be humorous. If I were to find a large pumpkin in my bathroom, I might find it funny. A snake in my bathroom is equally incongruous, but would not be likely to cause much laughter (Morreal, 1987, p. 130). This suggests that incongruities can cause a number of possible reactions, arranged somewhat like Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Hjelle and Ziegler, 1981, pp. 368–74). An incongruity is humorous only when it is perceived as non-threatening and pleasant. Nevertheless, as Morreal suggests, this is probably the best explanation for humorous laughter, as opposed to, say, laughter resulting from tickling (Morreal, 1987, p. 130).

Combinations of these three approaches are of course possible. A perception of incongruity may lead one to feel superior to others, or a perceived superiority may turn out to have been incongruously wrong. Increasingly, philosophers see laughter and humour as a complicated mixture of these approaches. Nevertheless, the main distinctions between the theories remains a useful one, and it gives us the tool to see both why early Buddhism rejected humour and why Zen Buddhism later embraced it. In short, they were using different theoretical approaches to laughter and humour.

Let us look again at the latter part of the injunction from the *Anguttara Nikaya*: 'Enough for you, if you are pleased righteously, to smile just to show your pleasure' (Woodward, 1979, p. 239). The term 'righteously' (*dhammapamoditanam*) leads one to believe that a superiority theory is being used here. But the Buddhist monk was already superior to other people merely because of his vocation: to show off this superiority by laughing loudly would not only be ill-mannered, but might alienate the lay support base on which the monastic community relied for physical sustenance. The Buddhist monk displays his superiority, paradoxically enough, by an outward display of humility, by eating whatever supporters care to give him, by owning nothing and speaking little. By extension, this attitude may answer the question why aristocratic subcultures generally have played down laughter and humour: If laughter expresses a feeling of superiority, and if one is already convinced of one's superior status, then laughter becomes otiose and humour, the object of laughter, an unnecessary luxury.

Clues can be found elsewhere in the early Buddhist scriptures. In one of the homiletic tales that make up the Dhammapada commentaries, a woman laughs and when forced to divulge the reason for her laughter, tells us that while another character took great pride in his own accomplishments, she had been the power behind him all the while, even saving his life on one occasion

(Burlingame, 1979a, p. 265). In another story, a man laughs and his concubine, who mistakenly believes herself to be the mistress of the house, jealously imagines that it is because he is in love with another woman (Burlingame, 1979b, pp. 104–5). In yet another story, a king is about to slaughter all pretenders to the throne along with their families. A queen, trying to dissuade him, laughs and weeps in turn. Once again, she is pressed to explain here reasons for laughing and crying. She explains that she has been going through many lifetimes of suffering to expiate her evil karma in a former existence, hence she cried at the memories, but that this unhappy series of incarnations is now over, hence the laughter. All those unhappy lifetimes were the result of killing a single sheep. What fate, then, awaits the king if he proceeds with his genocidal plans? (Burlingame, 1979c, pp. 109–10).

In each of these cases, we see that laughter is something that arouses suspicion, something that needs to be explained. One of the characters is even threatened with death if she does not explain her laughter. And in each case, the explanation is squarely within the parameters set by superiority theory. The characters feel superior to other characters, the sight of another person laughing makes them doubt their own superiority, or they feel superior to their own former position. These cases make it highly likely that superiority theory played an important role in the ancient Indian, or at least the ancient Buddhist, views of laughter and humour.

Another example of the ancient Buddhist approach to humour can be found in the *Suruci Jataka* (Frances and Neil, 1981, pp. 198–205), in which we find the story of 'the prince who could not laugh'. For seven years, the king holds a feast in order to make his son (one of the Buddha's disciples in a previous life) laugh. In the end, even the gods join in the effort. And while the final result is only a little smile on the part of the prince, the clowning around and self-abasement (jugglers, tumblers, men dancing in garments made of flowers, and finally a god dancing with one half of his body while keeping the other half perfectly still), has the rest of the assembly roaring with laughter. Again, the kind of slapstick humour described in this tale is largely consonant with the superiority theory.

But in Zen, we do not find the superiority theory employed. The two Zen masters we have seen above engaged in a duel of words even invert that theory, each vying with the other to abase himself as far as possible. Admittedly, one could see a measure of superiority in that, a superiority measured in inferiority, as it were. But the final word in that engagement 'wins' the encounter by advancing an incongruent element (a worm going on a summer vacation) into the discussion. The argument ends not when one of them can think of no lower station for himself, but by a change of tack in a completely unexpected direction.

Similarly, the humour in the story of Teng Yin-Feng (above), who died in a handstand position, lies in the incongruity between the actions of his disciples, who are awed by their master's unique accomplishment, and that of his sister, who sees it as just another example of her brother showing off. In Zen Buddhism, incongruities are not hidden away, to be thought of only as religious mysteries accessible only to gods and Buddhas. Instead, they are

brought out into the open, to demonstrate the absurdity of the human condition. Laughing at this absurdity is the first step in transcending it. And, perhaps, the final one too. Incongruity can be used to bring us 'down to earth', to show concretely how realisation is not necessarily something to be sought far in the future, sought for in lofty dogmas, but that it can be found in the here-and-now:

> A novice once asked master Chao-chou, thinking to obtain some lofty teaching or profound discourse: 'I have just entered the brotherhood and am anxious to learn the first principle of Zen. Will you please teach it to me?' Chao-chou responded, 'Have you eaten your supper?' The novice replied, 'I have'. 'Then go wash your bowl!'. (Hyers, 1974, p. 77)

There is always the possibility of another 'why' question, and perhaps we have merely succeeded in shifting the central question from 'Why did Zen Buddhism adopt a different approach to humour?' to 'Why does Zen use incongruity theory instead of the superiority theory prevalent in Early Buddhism?' Perhaps the answer lies in its Mahayana heritage, in the concept of Buddha-Nature that holds that we are all inherently enlightened, needing only to realise this fact, rather than having to attain a higher state called 'enlightenment'. Or it may be a legacy from Taoism, which saw life as the dynamic interplay between 'the way' and the 'ten thousand things'. What is clear is that incongruity, not superiority, is the basis of the widespread use of humour in Zen Buddhism.

Indeed, once we start using the idea of incongruity as the basis for humour, we see that Asian religion and philosophy is inherently humorous. For the incongruity of normal humour is one between matters as they are and as we expect them to be, between the real world and the one we have built up in our expectations. But in different ways, Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism all undermine our confidence in the 'real world'. What we see is the *lila* (play) of the gods, it is *maya* (illusion), the ongoing unfoldment of *Tao* (the way), profoundly empty of any ontological finality, and our insistence on taking the 'real world' seriously is the result of our own foolishness. In the end, the Asian world view leaves us with the incongruity of clashing perceptions and opinions, but these point only to other perceptions and opinions, not to a concrete 'ground of being'. The spectacle of people taking these perceptions and opinions oh-so-seriously, and being surprised to the point of laughter when presented with conflicting ones, is surely itself a source of amusement to one able to see the whole complex. Not a cause for deep laughter, perhaps, but enough to raise the wry, compassionate little smile we can see on statues of the Buddha.

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Notes

1. To facilitate accessibility to an audience not familiar with Indian languages, no diacritical marks will be used in this essay.

2. *Sita* is in fact a common Pali word for 'a smile' (Rhys Davids and Stede 1986, p. 709), see Sanskrit *smita*. A synonymous term is *mihita*. The specific usage here as an almost imperceptible smile may have been restricted to Buddhist monastic circles.
3. Maitreya Buddha is the saviour figure who will, according to Buddhist soteriology, suceed the historical Shakyamuni Buddha.
4. See Siegel, 1987, pp. 354–56 for another example of erotic material being theologised, though not, in this case, primarily in a humorous context. See also Ferro-Luzzi, 1990.
5. On p. 88, Siegel describes a meeting with an Indian writer who had attempted to translate Greek and Shakespearean tragedies into Sanskrit. He reported that, 'These made no sense in Sanskrit ... the sorrow was too vulgar and unresolved ... My (version of) Hamlet ... ends with the marriage of the prince to his beloved. Tragedy became comedy'. But when he started to translate Greek comedy (specifically, *The Frogs* by Aristophanes), 'I was continually startled at how easily the Greek words turned into Sanskrit'.
6. For example, a 'slapstick' was originally a device made of two thin strips of wood, loosely tied together, that made a loud whacking noise when applied to the buttocks of a stage buffoon in a pantomime.
7. It is a common device in ancient Indian comedy to indicate the social standing of a character according to the degree to which he or she speaks classical Sanskrit rather than the more common Prakrit dialects. The *bhana*, however, is presented entirely in Sanskrit.

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